

A Comparative Study of French and English Auxiliary Verbs

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Abstract

Auxiliary verbs in English and French languages are very germane in constructing sentences in both languages. Therefore, this study examines the way auxiliary verbs are used in English and French Languages; and some features where learners of either language may encounter some difficulties in the course of learning. Our attention is drawn to auxiliary verbs because verb is what that makes any sentence functions the way it is. Verb is one of the most important parts of speech in French grammar and also in English .It is through verb that one knows when an action takes place. When a verb helps another verb to form one of its tenses in a sentence, such verb can be said to be auxiliary. This paper also focuses on auxiliary verbs and how verbs are used in the past and present indications. Auxiliary verbs cannot stand or function alone without relying on the main verb in both English and French languages. Finally, we shall concurrently consider in this paper how semi-auxiliary verbs function as modal auxiliary in French.

Keywords: English, French, Comparison, Auxiliary and verbs.

Introduction

Discussing verbs without referring to conjugation in grammar is like building a house without adequate foundation. Building a house needs solid and good foundation so that the house can be durable and fit for habitation. The French verb to be precise undergoes a form of restructuring from its infinitive form to whatever form to form the particular tense needed. According to Ade Ojo {2002:326}, verb is the central word or the power unit in a clause or sentence. Verb is the main ingredient that makes a clause or a sentence functions the way it is. Auxiliary verbs are those verbs which are used to conjugate other verbs .Ade Ojo

{2002:344}.Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary puts it as: A verb such as be, do and have used with main verbs to show tense, etc. and to form questions and negatives

The word 'tense' comes from the same word as the French word 'temps' which means 'time'. The tense of a verb indicates that time at which the action of that particular verb took place and as such, the speaker does not need to give any additional information to indicate when the action of the verb took place. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines "tense" as any of the forms of a verb that may be used to show the time of the action or state expressed by the verb: The past/present/future tense. The purpose of this article is to highlight the distinctive features of French verbs over English verbs with emphasis on the application of the auxiliary verbs in forming compound tenses.

The verbs 'avoir 'and ' etre' which belong to the third group of verbs in French are the only auxiliary verbs used in the formation of compound tenses. These two verbs do not only serve as helping verbs, but they function also in their own capacity as main verbs in a sentence. E.g.:

English

i. The girl is intelligent.

French

La fille est intelligente.

ii. Le parrain a trop d'argent. The godfather has a lot of money.

In the above sentences we see that both verbs act as main verbs in both French and English.

Now, we are going to give the conjugation of the two auxiliary verbs, "Avoir" and "Etre" and their equivalence in English.

French:

Avoir

J'ai

Tu as

Il/Elle/On a

Nous avons

Vous avez

Etre

Je suis

Tu es

Il/Elle/On est

Nous sommes

Vous êtes

Ils/Elles ont

Ils/Elles sont

English:

To have

To be

I have

I am

You have

you are

He/ She/One has

He/she/One is

We have

We are

They have

They are

From the above, we can see that emphasis is placed on gender in French than in English. French is a language that is basically gender focused than English. Most especially, feminine gender is given priority as well as masculine gender. In French, if referring to a set of ladies in the class or a set of feminine objects, we say in French:

Elles sont dans la classe.

While in English, we say: they are in the class.

Elles in French allows any listener to quickly understand that the speaker is talking about a set of ladies or objects belonging to feminine gender in French but that is not the case in English. The personal pronouns in French are better expressly decoded by the listeners in a speech than those in English.

Also, there is use of neuter in English but not well pronounced in French (il/elle/is used in the singular form to refer to “it” and ils/elles is used in plural form to refer to “they”). In English, “it” is used for non-living to replace a name. Let us the examples below:

English

French

Where are the chairs?

Où sont les chaises?

They are in the class.

Elles sont dans la class.

In the above example, we are able to see that French shows that the object being asked of belongs to feminine gender, but in English that is totally lacking.

The ball hits me on the face.

To replace the ball with a pronoun, one says in English that It hits me on the face.

But, in French, one says:

il me touche en visage.

In our conjugation we mentioned that ‘il’ is the third person masculine singular pronoun. Il in French can refer to a third person being referred to or an inanimate object being referred as there is no neuter in French as it is in English. This is what happens in above example. A learner of French who is not familiar to the use of third person singular/plural pronouns may get confused on how to use them appropriately.

Another problematic area for the learner of French is the inappropriate use of “aller” in constructing a sentence in the present tense.

For example:

English

French

I am going home.

Je suis allé à la maison

In the above example, this learner directly used the English syntax to form that of French.

Looking at the sentence in French, two verbs are used (auxiliary, *etre* and main verb, *aller*) whenever this occurs in French, it refers to past action. Our point here is: I am going home and not I went home. We can see the contradistinction of purpose in the two sentences.

Having made a disparity in that, let us go to compound tenses in French and English.

Compound Tenses in French and English: Le Nouveau Bescherelles. L'art de conjuguer dictionnaire de 12000 verbes puts the conjugation of the verb "to eat" in various forms thus:

English	French	Tenses
I have eaten	J'ai mangé	Present perfect
I was eaten	Je mangeais	Past progressive
I will eat	Je mangerai	Future tense
I will have eaten	J'aurai mangé	Future perfect
I would eat	Je mangerais	Conditional tense
I would have eaten	J'aurais mangé	Past conditional

From the above, the common differences in the structure of the verb tenses in both French and English Grammars are highlighted. While the compound tenses existing in English grammar are formed by one or more auxiliary verbs plus the main verb, the French distinguished itself with the use of only two auxiliary verbs 'avoir' and 'etre' plus the past participle of the main verb. However, when a verb tense is composed of an auxiliary verb plus a main verb, it is termed a compound verb. Now, let us consider the following compound verb in the two languages we are focusing.

The Past Tense: English and French

In English, there are several forms of verbs that indicate an action that occurred in the past .For instance:

I was dancing	Past progressive
I used to dance	Imperfect tense
I have danced	present perfect
I had danced	Past perfect
I have been dancing	Perfect continuous
I had been dancing	past perfect continuous

In French, there are many verb tenses that express an action which occurred in the past. We have, the Passé compose, the imparfait, the passé récent, the conditionnel passé etc. Each of these tenses has its own set of endings and its rules which tell us when and how to use it.

Examples of the tenses are given below: Here, we can also see the similarities between French and English using the helping verb ‘avoir’ in forming some of the tenses. Tenses such as: Passe compose, l’imparfait, conditionnel passé, etc.

Présent de l’indicatif (manger)

Je mange
Tu manges
Il/Elle/On mange
Nous mangeons
Vous mangez
Ils/Elles mangent

Passé compose

J’ai mangé
Tu as mangé
Il/Elle/On a mangé
Nous avons mangé
Vous avez mangé
Ils/Elles ont mangé

Passe récent

Je viens de manger
Tu viens de manger
Il /Elle/On vient de manger
Nous venons de manger

L’imparfait

Je mangeais
Tu mangeais
Il/Elle/On mangeait
Nous mangions

Vous venez de manger

Vous mangiez

Ils/Elles viennent de manger

Ils/Elles mangeaient

Conditionnel passe

J'aurais mangé

Tu aurais mangé

Il/Elle/on aurait mangé

Nous aurions mangé

Vous auriez mangé

Ils/Elles auraient mangé

The above tenses are translated in English below:

Present tense

I eat/I am eating

You eat/you are eating

He/she/one eats/ eating

We eat/we are eating

They eat /they are eating

Pass tense

I ate

you ate

He ate/she ate

We ate

They ate

Immediate past action

I have just eaten

You have just eaten

He/she/ On has just eaten

We have just eaten

They have just eaten

Imperfect tense

I used to eat

you used to eat

He/she/On used to eat

we used to eat

they used to eat

Past conditional

I would have eaten

You would have eaten

He/she/one would have eaten

We would have eaten

They would have eaten

In the above, we can see that in the present tense of the infinitive verb ‘manger’ / ‘to eat,’ English uses both auxiliary verb ‘être’ which means the verb ‘to be’ and the principal verb ‘to eat’ while French uses only the main verb to form the present action of the verb ‘to eat’. Also, there is the use of modal auxiliary verb in the past conditional of the verb ‘to eat’ while French uses a simple formula to form its.

Another thing we notice here is the use of honorific pronoun ‘vous’ in French. French language is honorific and tonal while English language lacks these essential qualities. Furthermore, let us consider the rules of agreement between French and English:

Rules of Agreement.

- | | |
|-------------------|-------------------------|
| i. J’ai parlé . | I spoke/ I have spoken. |
| Ii. Je suis allé. | I went/ I have gone. |

Structure 1:

Depending on which auxiliary verb is required the following rules of agreement are indispensable.

- a. If the auxiliary verb is être, the past participle agrees with the subject in French. This is however not the case in English. For examples:
- b. (i) Adedayo est allé au marché. (French)
Adedayo- singular, masculine subject ; alle-past participle Adedayo went to the market. (English)
- (ii) Madame Ngozi est allée au marché.

Madam Ngozi went to the market.

(iii) Adedayo et Madame Ngozi sont allés au marché.

Adedayo and Madam Ngozi went to the market.

(iv) Madame Marie et Mademoiselle Funmilola sont allées au marché.

In the above sentences, we see that the meaning does not change though there are elements of change because of the past participle agreeing with the subject in French, but that of English does not change.

In French, even if there is one male among 20 females, the person and the people are always put in the masculine form in the passé composé. That is what happened in sentence iii above.

Structure 11:

In forming past action in English, past tense of verb is used to indicate the action. But in French auxiliary verb plus past participle is used. Let us consider the following sentences:

a. Il a vu le professeur hier. (avoir +past participle of avoir)

He saw the teacher yesterday.

b. J'y ai été.(avoir +past participle of etre) I have been there.

c. Il a eu un livre. (avoir +past participle of avoir)

He had a textbook.

d. Festus est sorti avec Felix. (etre +past participle of sortir) Other examples are:

(i) Mon père est arrivé hier. (masculine, singular) My father arrived yesterday.

(ii) Mes sœurs sont arrivées hier. (Feminine, plural) My sisters arrived yesterday.

In the above, we note all verbs conjugated with etre to form past tense are subject to the law of agreement.

The imperfect tense (L'imparfait)

According to Umukoro G. and Odey V. (2013:122), the conjugation of the imparfait seems so regular and easy to memorize, it might however be confusing for English students who are learning French to know when to use the imparfait. They illustrated this with the following examples:

- a. If the English verb form includes the English auxiliary used to, the French verb is put in the imparfait.

Structure 111:

When I was a child, I ran to school every morning.

NB: I ran can be replaced by I used to run.

Quand j'étais petit, je courais à l'école tous les matins.

- a. If the English verb form is in the past progressive tense, the French puts it in the imparfait.

I was running yesterday. (English)

Je courais hier. (French)

However, in addition to the auxiliary verbs "avoir" and etre, French has a number of semiauxiliary verbs. Ade Ojo (2014:197) maintains that semi-auxiliary verbs are conjugated in order to express various nuances of time, mood or aspect and are followed by an infinitive. Some semi-auxiliary verbs are equivalent to modal verbs in English. Here, we are going to see the similarities and differences between the two languages while considering the followings word: Aller, devoir, faillir, faire, laisser etc.

The followings are some of the similarities of semi auxiliary verbs in the two languages:

French

English

Aller (in present or in imperfect tense)

Je vais étudier. (future proche)

I am going to study.

J'allais étudier. (l'imparfait)

I was going to study.

Va chercher les clés! (future proche)

Go and look for the keys!

Je suis allé voir mon frère. (passé composé)

I went to see my brother.

Je veux te dire une chose. (futur proche)

I want to tell you something.

From the above, we can see that the two languages are similar in syntax and in semantic. In

French “vais, allais, va, suis, veux.” are the semi auxiliary verbs used. also in English, “am, was, go, went, want.” are the auxiliary verbs used.

- **Devoir**

J'ai du partir.

I had to leave.

Tu dois manger!

You must eat!

- Conditional tense (should) use devoir:

Je devrais partir.

I should leave.

Il aurait dû nous aider.

He should have helped us.

- Faillir (indicates that something almost happened)

Il a failli tomber.

He almost fell

J'ai failli rater l'examen.

I nearly failed the test.

- Faire (causative construction) to make something happen, have something done, make someone to do something.

J'ai fait laver la voiture.

I had the car washed.

Il me fait étudier.

He is making me study.

- Laisser (to let something happen, let someone do something).

Vas-tu me laisser sortir?

Are you going to let me go out?

Laisse-moi le faire.

Let me do it.

- Manquer (followed by optional de) indicates that something was about to happen or nearly happened.

J'ai manqué (de)mourir.

I almost died.

Elle a manqué (de) pleurer.

She nearly cried.

- Paraître (to appear /seem to)

Ca paraît être une erreur.

That appears to be an error.

Il paraissait être malade.

He seemed to be sick.

- Partir (to leave)

Peux-tu partir acheter du pain?

Could you go out and buy some bread?

Il est parti étudier en Italie.

He went to study in Italy.

- Pouvoir (can,may,might,to be able to)

Je peux vous aider.

I can help you.

Il peut être prêt.

He might be ready.

- Savoir (to know how to)

Sais-tu nager?

Do you know how to swim?

Je ne sais pas lire.

I do not know how to read.

- Sembler (to seem/appear to)

Cela semble indiquer que....

That seems to indicate that....

La machine semble fonctionner.

The machine appears to be working.

- Sortir de (informal)to have just done something

On sort de manger.

We just ate.

Il sortait de finir.

He had just finished.

- Venir (to come)

Je suis venu aider.

I've come to help.

- Venir a (to happen to)

David est venu à arriver.

David happened to arrive

- Venir de (to have just done something)

Je viens de me lever.

I just got up.

- Vouloir (to want to)

Je ne veux pas lire ça.

I don't want to read that.

Veux-tu sortir ce soir.

Do you want to go out tonight?

Having considered similarities, let us consider the divergences between the two languages.

Modal verbs, also called modal auxiliary or simply modals, are not conjugated English verbs which express the mood of a verb, such as ability, possibility, condition, and necessity. Modals are followed directly by the verb they modify (without “to” in between). There are ten common English modal verbs:

- i. Can
- ii. Could iii. May iv. Might
- v. Must
- vi. Ought to vii. Shall viii. Should ix. Will
- x. Would

French does not have modal verbs; that is why it is difficult for Anglophone learner of French to make proper use of it in French when the needs arise. Instead, French semi-auxiliary is used. The French equivalent modal verbs may be a conjugable verb. Some of these verbs are shown below with some examples:

- Can/pouvoir (in the present tense)

I can help you.

Je peux vous aider

We can see it.

Nous pouvons le voir Can you swim?

Sais-

tu nager?

- Could/pouvoir(in the conditional)

I could dance all night.

Je pourrais danser pendant toute la nuit.

Could you help me?

Pourriez-vous m'aider?

- Could/Pouvoir (in the past /imperfect)

He could eat a lot of candy when he was three. Il pouvait manger beaucoup de bonbons quand il avait trois ans.

Last year, I could sleep till noon every Saturday. L'année dernière, je pouvais dormir jusqu'à midi tous les samedis.

- May/Might /Pouvoir (conditional)

She may/might arrive at noon. Elle arrivera peut-être à midi. /Elle pourrait arriver à midi.

- Must/Devoir (present tense)

Je dois partir.

I must leave.

Vous devez m'aider.

You must help me.

- Shall/will (future tense)

Je vous aiderai.

I shall/will help you.

Il arrivera à midi.

He will arrive at noon.

- Should/Ought to/Devoir (in the conditional)

Je devrais partir bientôt.

I should/ought to leave soon.

Vous devriez m'aider.

You should/ought to help me.

- Would (in the present conditional)

Nous voudrions partir.

We would like to leave.

Je vous aiderais si j'étais prêt.

I would help you if I was ready.

- Would (in the past/imperfect tense)

Il lisait toujours quand il était seul. He would always read when he was alone.

L'année dernière, je dormais jusqu'à midi tous les jours. Last year I would sleep until noon every day.

As indicated above, it would be difficult for French language learner whose background is English to make adequate use of semi-auxiliary verbs if critical study about it is not carried out because of his /her acquaintance to the rule of modal system of the latter.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper focused on the past and compound tenses in French. It has taken time to demonstrate how past and compound tenses are formed in French language. It has also discussed some variations that an English student who is learning French language is likely to come across in the study of the language, such as: in the area of modals, concord, conjugation of verbs according to time, etc.

Secondly, though French grammar may appear simple, there are some aspects of the language that are difficult to comprehend and handle by English students and students of English who are learning French language. The panacea to this problem is that anybody who is interested in study French language should as matter of fact be ready to get him/herself drenched with the varieties and different categories of French verbs and how they are conjugated. He or she must also study attentively the various verb forms to know when and how to use them.

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